What is Hinduism

1. The Scriptures of the Hindus

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Faith may not move mountains, but it does climb them. - Humberto D. Pagula

Jan Carlzon, President of the Scandinavian Airlines System, is never short of a pithy management adage. "Run through walls" is one of his favorites. If tested, he says, many stone walls turn out to be nothing more than cardboard facades. — Moments of Truth (Ballinger).

Be like a postage stamp - stick to one thing until you get there.

A peaceful man does more good than a learned one. - Pope John XXIII

Memories are the key not to the past, but to the future.

Be able to be alone. Lose not the advantage of solitude - Sir Thomas Browne.

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The ~~books~~ authority which ~~are~~ is the very souls of Hinduism is called 'Sru meaning which has been heard or revealed. These 'Srutis' are known as the vedas. The word 'Veda' is derived from the word 'Vid' to know, and the vedas are holy or spiritual knowledge of the Eternal Truth. The word 'Rishi' is derived from the word 'diris', to see. The Rishis were the Seers or sages to whom the Vedas were revealed by Divine intervention and in whose hearts and minds they were heard. The vedas are of divine origin, are unchangeable and eternal. They teach the highest truths ever known to man, and are valid for all times and all ages.

Hindus believe that Creation is Anadi (that which has no ~~beginning~~ beginning) and that it is eternal. At the end of each 'Kalpa' a unit of time equal to a day of Brahma, the creator, amounting to 4,320 million earth years), it exists in a subtle form in God, from whence each time is recreated a new universe.

Brahma, the Creator, is believed to have meditated at the beginning of this age, called the Swetavaraha Kalpa, when the Great God appeared in the form of the sound of Om (ॐ) also known as the Pranava. Om is the most sacred symbol of Hindus.

Brahma ~~is~~ prays to the Creator for knowledge to create a new Universe. It is a belief that from the vibrations of the sound of Om, the Lord conceived the Rigveda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda. The Creator taught the Vedas to Brahma who created our present Universe with this supreme knowledge received by him. The vedas existed even before the creation of our universe.

It was sage Veda Vyasa who codified the four Vedas. His disciples, Paila, Vaishampayana, Jaimini and

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Sumanta taught them to their disciples and the latter, in turn, to their pupils. The vedas have come to us through this tradition which is thousand of years old. They are called 'Amnaya' that which has come to us by Tradition -

The Rigveda consists mostly of hymns in praise of the Divine, the yajurVeda mainly of hymns used in religious rituals and rites, the Sama Veda of verses from the Rigveda set to music, and the Atharva Veda guides man in his material and daily living.

The Vedas have several parts. They are the 'mantra' (or hymns) the Brahmana (or the explanatory treatises for using 'mantras' in rituals), the Aranyaka or forest books (which are the mystical interpretations of the mantras and rituals) and the upanishads. The Upanishads are the most important part of the vedas, as it is believed that knowledge of the upanishads brings about the destruction of Avidya or ignorance, one of the greatest failings of mankind.

Hinduism is unique in that it accepts that the rules of Society change with every age, and therefore the laws, or the Dharma Shastras, must change from time to time. Since these laws are enunciated for the guidance of man, they are governed by the time and age he lives in. Hinduism is a living, practical religion because it accepts that the laws governing the Conduct of man and society are man-made laws which have to be flexible and dynamic and subject to change.

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Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world and is the faith of over four-fifths of the diverse peoples of the vast sub-continent of India, of the people of Nepal and Bali (Indonesia) and of millions of Indians who have migrated overseas. There are besides, many ancient cultures, as in South-East Asia, which have been greatly influenced by the Hindu Cultural beliefs.

The History of the Hindus, goes back 5000 years, but ~~at the~~ Hindus believe that their religion is without ~~beginning~~ beginning or end and is a continuous process even preceding the existence of our earth and the many other worlds beyond. Science today accepts that there may be other worlds in the Vast Universe, each with its own laws. Hindus have held this view from time immemorial.

The word Hindu is of geographic origin and was derived from the name originally given to the people settled on the River Sindhu. It was corrupted by foreign visitors to the word 'Hindu', and the faith of the Hindus was given the name 'Hinduism' in the English language. Scholars however call this the Brahmanical faith, to attain the Brahman or the Universal Soul is the ultimate aim of all Hindu thought.

One of the unique quality of Hinduism is its tremendous tolerance of other religious faiths and beliefs. In the Bhagavat Gita, an important scripture of Hinduism, Lord Krishna, worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu himself, says "whosoever follows any faith and worships me under whatsoever denomination in whatsoever form with steadfastness, his faith shall I indeed reinforce". The Lord worshipped by the Hindus implies in effect, "Come to me as a Hindu, Christian, Muslim or Sikh. I shall make you a better Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Sikh." Conversion to Hinduism (minimal as it is) has therefore never been through force or wars, nor as a result of bigotry or by temptations offered to the economically weak, nor does bringing about conversions confer any special spiritual benefits.

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Hinduism – An Introduction. by Shakuntala Jagannathan (1)

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The Short history of the Puranas

There are 18 Puranas of which the Bhagavata, Vishnu and Markandeya Puranas are most popular, and 18 subsidiary or Upa puranas. The Stories in the puranas have formed the very basis of the religious education which help to teach in simple language fundamental truths of religion and morality, of what is right and wrong in behaviour.

These Puranas have been conveyed to successive generations by word of mouth, by grandmothers to their grandchildren, by the village priest and by the wandering minstrel. Walls of temples are covered with carvings of Puranic stories, a visual method of educating the ordinary people.

To convey the idea that God is everywhere, full of compassion and always comes to the help of His devotee, the story of Prahlada is significant. Prahlada's father, the demon King Hiranyakashipu, tried his best to teach his son that there was non more powerful than himself. But Prahlada was engrossed in his worship of the Lord. Hiranyakashipu shouted at his son – "Do not pray to any but me, Hiranya-Kashipu, the greatest of them all. I have a

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boon that neither man, beast nor weapon can kill me. Nor can I die inside or outside a house, at day-time or at night, on earth or in the sky. Where then is this God of whom you always speak? Let him dare appear before me!"

But the child Prahlada insisted that God was everywhere, outside and within us and all around us. "Is he in this pillar? If so let him come out and fight me or I will kill you". Saying this he struck the pillar. Out of the pillar, which burst open, Vishnu appeared as Narasimha and destroyed evil in the form of the demon. Neither man nor beast killed Hiranyakashipu, but Vishnu did as Narasimha, half-man, half lion. He killed him neither inside nor outside the palace but on the door-step, on the threshold. He was killed not by day or by night but at the hour of twilight. He did not kill him on the earth or in the sky but did so by placing him on his lap.

By this story the all embracing compassion of the Lord is described. God finds some way to come to the aid of those devotees who place their total faith in him.

Yama, the god of death, full of compassion for chaste and good woman like savitri is described to help her in Savitri upakhyana in the purana. Born the daughter of the king of Madra, Savitri chose Satyavan, the son of a deposed king, the blind Dyumat-Sena, as her husband. The couple lived with Satyavan's parents in the forest. Savitri knew from Sage Narada himself that Satyavan would die one year hence. On the day of his predicted death she followed him into the forest

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when he went out to cut wood, All the time worrying as to how she could prevent Death from taking him away.

By the power of her purity, Savitri saw yama, the god of Death, take Satyavan's 'prana' ~~life or~~ or breath of life, and followed him. She pleased him greatly by her words of wisdom and got four boons given to her provided she did not ask for Satyavan's life. As the fourth boon, she asked for a hundred sons and yama granted her wish. She then asked yama how she, a chaste woman, could bear sons when her husband was no longer alive. Not being able to go back on his word, which is considered one of the greatest of wrongs, yama gave back Satyavan alive to Savitri.

Princess Sukanya blinded an old sage, Rishi Chyvana, by accident, she then insisted on marrying him and looking after him, thereby sacrificing her life of the luxury as a princess, and spending her hours caring for her old and blind husband. A pure and chaste woman Sukanya through her devotion, restored the youth and eyesight of sage Chyavana.

Dhruva, a young prince, who by his constancy and meditation won the eternal blessings of Compassionate Vishnu. Dhruva was transformed by the merciful God, after his death, into the only star in the universe that stays unmoved, the pole star, known to be Dhruva.

All merciful and compassionate Shiva gave Markandeya the gift of immortality. Markandeya was given only a 16-year span of life, he conquered his predestined Fate by his devotion to Shiva and did not allow death to take him away on the due date. Even to-day when one has to bless the child when he sneezes, the words are "May you have the life span of Markandeya"

A dutiful son Shravana, denied himself the joys of childhood and boyhood while caring for his old and blind parents. When they wished to go on a pilgrimage to holy cities, he placed them in bamboo baskets tied to a pole which he carried on his young shoulders and cheerfully undertook the journey at great discomfort to himself

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King Usinara of the Sibi clan was a great and just king whose compassion and generosity knew no bounds. Once when a dove rushed to him for help to escape a hawk, the king gave it protection. The hawk protested at being deprived of his rightful food. The Sibi King offered his flesh as substitute, but however much he cut slices of flesh from his body, the weight of the dove was greater. Usinara then offered himself in entirety and balanced the scale. Indra, the King of the Devas (celestial beings or lesser gods) and Agni, the god of 'fire', had taken the form of the hawk and the dove only to test the generosity and justice of the Sibi King, Usinara. The virtue of placing generosity over and above one's life is the main aim of Sibi's life.

Sudama (also known as Kuchela) was an impoverished Brahmin with innumerable children. He had been a childhood companion of Lord Krishna at sage Sandeepani's hermitage. One day, when there was not a morsel of food in the house, his wife forced him to go to Krishna to get some help. The only gift he took to Krishna were a few handfuls of beaten rice, but was shy of giving this poor gift to the great Krishna, who however, forced it out of his hand and ate a mouthful. When Sudama returned without having asked Krishna for any favours, he found his hut turned into a mansion and his family prosperous any happy due to the compassionate blessings of Krishna.

In puranas the ten incarnations, the Avataras teach mankind that God has re-established Dharma or righteous justice and destroys injustice from time to time by appearing on earth in various incarnations. It is in ~~Par~~ puranas that Buddha is described ~~also~~ one of the incarnations as 'Compassionate One'.

The first avatar, that of Matsya the fish, was taken by Vishnu at the end of the last Kalpa or age, when there was a deluge that destroyed the world that existed then. Choosing a sage, Rishi ~~St~~ Satyavrata, Lord Vishnu commanded him to gather together the seven great sages, samples of all animals, birds, plants, and seeds, and wait in a boat. The gigantic golden fish then

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dragged the boat ~~through~~ through the turbulent oceans all through the long, long night of Brahma till the deluge ended and Brahma created the present world. This Avatar is akin to the story of Noah's Ark in the old Testament; an evidence of the closeness in many of the beliefs of ancient religions. Another version has it that a demon once stole the four Vedas and hid them under the sea. Vishnu took the form of a giant fish and retrieved these scriptures.

In the Kurma Avatar, Vishnu took the form of a tortoise to help the Devas (heavenly beings or lesser gods), to obtain the nectar of immortality which the Asuras (demons) were also after. The Devas and Asuras churned the ocean to get this nectar, using the giant snake, Vasuki, as the churning rope and Mount Mandara as the churning rod. To prevent the mountain sinking into the ocean, Vishnu as a giant tortoise supported the mountain under water until the nectar of immortality emerged which Vishnu gave to the Devas alone.

At the end of the deluge in the last 'Kalpa' or age, Bhoomi Devi (mother Earth) sank into the bottom of the ocean. Vishnu taking the form of a large boar, Varaha, dived into the ocean and carried the goddess out of the waters supported by his massive snout.

In order to give deliverence to Bali, king of the demons, Vishnu took the Avatar of a midget, Vamana. He appeared during a huge yajna or sacrifice being conducted by the king when the latter was arrogantly distributing gifts to all who asked for it to show his power and wealth. Vamana asked for just three feet of land, measured by his own small feet. With the first ~~he~~ foot he covered the earth, with the second, the heavens. When there was no place for the next foot of land, Bali, to show that he never went back on his word, offered his head. Lord Vishnu sent him to the nether regions but glorified this act unto eternity.

When the kings of the earth became autocratic and started to harm ordinary people and sages in the forest, Vishnu took the Avatar of Parshurama and destroyed all the Kshatriyas (princes) who were harassing the people.

When priesthood became arrogant and priests used rituals

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to exploit the people, Vishnu took the Avatar of the Buddha to purify Hindu practices of excessive ritualism. He taught that all sorrow stemmed from attachments and desires and advocated a Middle Path consisting of the eight-fold virtues of right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.

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The great epics of Hinduism are the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the yogavasishta and the Harivamsa. They teach the greatest of truths in an easy, friendly way without taxing the mind, as the language is simple and the contents easily understood.

Most foreign visitors to India wonder why gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon are shown with several arms, and sometimes with several faces. The main reason is to show them to be supernatural, just as in some religions angels are shown to have wings. We are aware that the Supreme Brahman is formless. It is man, in the primitive stages of society, who has given the Great Spirit understandable human forms of His power and His attributes, to teach the ordinary people of His greatness, His omniscience and His omnipotence.

Hinduism adopted and assimilated the religious beliefs of all the primitive tribes and peoples with whom the early Hindus came into contact. Its tolerance of all religions is unique as it did not destroy the beliefs of the peoples the ancient Hindus conquered but absorbed them. Every religion which Hinduism absorbed had its own gods and beliefs, and every race its own rituals and rites. Hinduism assimilated them all never destroying the beliefs in the gods or the totems of any of the tribes and peoples whom the early Hindus conquered. It is one of the greatest miracles of the spiritual world that Hinduism gathered so many, many different religions in its fold, and brought thousands of differing religious beliefs under the umbrella of Vedic Hinduism, with the upanishadic aphorism, 'Ekam Sat Viprah bahudha vadanti' (the Great God is one, and the learned only call Him by different names)

Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world and is unique in its tolerance of other religions. It offers different spiritual paths to persons of different aptitudes, and places emphasis on individual spiritual experience.

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philosophic thinkers do not like to describe Hinduism as a mere religion as they feel that this narrows it down and does not bring out adequately its great qualities of discipline of out look and free thinking, as even an atheist is not precluded from being a Hindu and no hell nor doomsday envisioned for the agnostic. It is called Sanatana Dharma or the Eternal Religion. Some call it a fellowship of religions from its liberal absorption of the faiths of others.

The greatness of Hinduism is at once its complexity and its simplicity, and the fact that it permeates totally the life of every Hindu from the ~~time~~ moment of his birth, be ~~he~~ he a believer or non-believer, a scholar or an illiterate. It is for this reason that it is often said that Hinduism is not just a religion but a way of life.

It is important to realise, that Hinduism is a rare faith with few "do's" and "don'ts" postulated, but one which has many signposts showing the different spiritual paths available to different types of people. It accepts the reality that there are varying intellectual and spiritual levels in each one of us and all cannot therefore take the same path, although the goal may be the same. Hinduism therefore offers different approaches to persons of different aptitudes, depending on whether he be a philosopher or a poet, a mystic or a man of action, an intellectual or a simple man of faith. This is a unique feature of the religion as it permits the greatest of freedom of worship and insists that each person must be guided by his or her own individual spiritual experience. It does not accept dictatorship in ~~re~~ religious guidance.

The ultimate goal for the individual soul-as stated in Hinduism is- in each one of us, known as the Atma, to attain the Brahman or the Universal Soul. All souls are not ~~able~~ able to achieve this happy state even after death. On the other hand most of us die only to be born again and again. This cycle of birth, death and rebirth is called 'Samsara', and every soul must go through this cycle of births and deaths before it attains 'moksha' or liberation. Only the soul which reaches perfection in this life becomes one with the Brahman and is not born again.

Hind believe in 'Karma' and accept that

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the Great God would be cruel enough to create the great inequalities that exist in the world. He would not create one child beloved of happy parents, another who is handicapped or blind and a third who is unwanted, born to impoverished parents and left hungry. The inequalities of life are understandable only when we realise that they are of Man's own karma or actions and not of God's creation. Each one of us at birth is the result of our past life. Our birth in this life is determined by the good and bad thoughts, words and deeds of a previous birth. This doctrine of 'Samsara' or rebirth is also called the theory of re-incarnation or the transmigration of the soul and is a basic tenet of Hinduism. The upanishads compare the passage of the soul to a caterpillar which climbs a blade of grass, leaves it and jumps on to a new one. Just as a man changes worn-out garments and wears new ones, so does the soul cast away one body and take on another. We do not carry the burden of our previous lives in our consciousness, though we do in our sub-conscious minds. The birth of a musical genius in an unmusical family, or of great scholars and artistes whose education and environment do not explain their chievements, are a few evidences of the spill-over from previous births.

One of the basic beliefs of Hinduism is the law of karma or Action, the law of cause and effect. It is explained by the saying, 'as we sow, so shall we reap.' A farmer cannot leave his fields fallow and expect a crop of wheat. Nor can he sow wheat and expect a field of rice. Similarly every good thought, word or deed begets a similar re-action which effects our next lives and every unkind thought, harsh word and evil deed comes back to harm us in this life or the next.

The aim of the Hindu Dharma is to break this chain of birth and rebirth that binds him to the earth, the first step to be taken on this path is for each one to perform well his

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own ~~duty~~ 'dharma' or righteous duties. Hinduism is unique because it differentiates between the duties of man and man, as also between the duties to be followed at various stages of one's life. Lord Rama's 'dharma' as an exile for 14 years was different to his later dharma as a ruler. The teacher, the nurse, the priest, a mother or father each has to follow his or her own dharma. Duties, whatever they are, have to be performed with excellence and moral purity as the goal.

The Concept of 'Dharma' is fundamental to Hinduism, as it is believed that it is only through the pursuit of Dharma that there is social harmony and peace in the world. The pursuit of Adharma (a path that rejects righteousness) leads to conflicts, discord and imbalance.

The saying, 'Dharanat Dharmah' means Dharma sustains the world and it is that which holds the world together. It is duty performed with righteousness, with discipline and moral and spiritual excellence. Varnashrama Dharma (the classified duties of different people according to their capabilities, capacities and physical and mental strength), is fundamental to Hindu belief and includes the duties of the various occupations, orders and classes (varna) and the duties in the four stages (ashramas,

Brahmacharyashrama - Studying upto the age of twenty five,
Grihasthashrama - marrying, rearing children and participating in the active social life till the age of fifty,
Vanaprasthashrama - living in jungles renouncing the comforts of the ~~household~~ life of the householder till the age of seventy five.
Sannyasashrama - Not staying even in jungles but roaming about to deliver sermons or to advice younger people about the facts of life and experience till death. ~~of one's life~~.

~~is fundamental to Hindu belief and includes the duties of the various occupations, orders and classes (varna). It~~

It enjoins that each person's 'dharma' or duty depends on his occupation, position, moral and spiritual development, age and marital status.

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Status of Women

The Status of women in early Hindu Society was an enviable one. Women so inclined could avail of the highest learning and there were many seers and philosophers like Maitreyi, Gargi, Vishavavara, Ghosha, and Apala. Adi Shankara, in a theological debate with Mandanamishra, appointed as judge the latter's wife Sarasweti, in view of her superior erudition and spiritual attainments. Warrior Queens like Kaikeyi helped their husbands on the battlefield.

In princely families, the custom of Swayamvara or selection of the groom by the princess garlanding the one of her choice amongst all the princes present, was the accepted norm. Inter-marriages were common and women often chose their own husbands. Shakuntala, the daughter of a Brahmin Sage, chose Dushyanta, a Kshatriya prince and married him. ~~Santanu~~ Santanu, A Kshatriya king married Satyavati, a fisher woman, who was crowned queen. Even after her husband's death she was revered as the queen Mother, and decided many matters of state and problems of family successions.

Polygamy existed in some societies but mostly amongst princes who contracted several marriages with daughters of neighbouring rulers for political reasons. Polyandry was also practised in some areas. The classic example is Draupadi, who married the five Pandava brothers.

Girls were normally not married till they were in their late teens, sometimes even later. Hindu Society as established by the Indo-Aryans was Patriarchal, but many matriarchal societies of the Dravidian and the pre-Dravidian south continued to exist until quite late in history even after the adoption of Vedic Hinduism. To-day only Kerala in the south is matriarchal though even here changes are creeping in.)

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Ramayana - Ramayana known as the Adikavya or the first poetic composition of the world, was written by the great sage Rishi Valmiki. In this epic is given the story of Rama, believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, born on earth to show the path of righteousness.

Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya, had four sons, Rama, born of his first queen Kausalya, Lakshmana and Shatrughna, born of his second queen, Sumitra, and Bharata, born of his favourite queen Kaikeyi.

Rama was banished to the forest for 14 years at the behest of his step-mother, Kaikeyi, and left with his wife, Seeta and brother, Lakshmana. In the forest Seeta was abducted by the demon-king, Ravana of Lanka. Rama, helped by an army of monkeys, and by Hanuman, the most loyal of them all, fought and destroyed Ravana and brought back Seeta. He was then crowned king and ruled over Ayodhya.

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Brahma

The three main functions of God-head, Creation, Preservation and destruction are performed by the one Great God, Ishwara, being called Brahma, when he takes over the Creation of the Universe Vishnu, when He assumes the role of the preserver, and Shiva, when he is the Destroyer.

Brahma the Creator, is shown with four heads facing all four directions symbolising that he has created the entire universe. The fact that after each 'Kalpa' or age, he meditates and recreates the universe we live in is symbolised by the Vedas he holds in his hands which guide him, and the 'Kamandalu' or vessel which is used in the ritual of prayer prior to 'tapasya' (meditation and penance), after which he creates the universe. He sits on a lotus which is a symbol of purity, as the lotus usually grows in muddy waters but is untouched by the dirt and mire from which it emerges. To emphasise the closeness of creation and preservation, Brahma is shown emerging from the navel of Vishnu, the preserver.

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Vishnu

~~Vishnu~~ Vishnu is represented as lying on the many-headed cobra, Ananta, in the ocean of milk. Ananta denotes cosmic energy and the ocean symbolises 'ananda' or the endless bliss and grace of the Brahman. Vishnu is given the colour blue to symbolise infinity, as he is as limitless as the blue sky. He holds the 'Chakra' or discus in one hand denoting that he maintains Dharma (righteousness) and order in the universe. The 'Shankha' or conch that he holds in the other hand is for the removal of ignorance and is also symbolic of Nada-Brahmam or the Music of the Cosmos, as the conch when placed to the ear has a deep humming sound. The 'gada' or mace is for removing the evil in the world and the lotus is the symbol of the beauty and purity of the Cosmic Universe. The vehicle of Vishnu is Garuda, the man-eagle, a figure of great strength, power and piety.

The feminine aspect of the preserver is Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. The grace of God is personified in her as one who brings prosperity. One hand she holds in the 'abhaya mudra' (with the hand held open with the palm facing the devotee and the fingers facing upwards) which says "Do not fear" and the other in the 'Varada mudra' (with the hand with the palm facing the devotee but ~~the~~ with the fingers facing downwards) symbolic of the prosperity and grace she gives to the human race. She sits on the lotus and holds lotus flowers in her hand emphasising the importance of pure living without which her grace and giving are meaningless and prosperity but an empty shell.

Bhoo Devi, or Mother earth, is depicted as the second consort of Vishnu.

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Ganesha

Ganesha is known as Ganapati or Vinayaka, is the son of Shiva and Parvati and is the first deity to be worshipped during any ritual, as he is considered the remover of obstacles. His huge body represents the Cosmos or the Universe and his trunk the pranava or Om, the symbol of the Brahman. His elephant's head denotes superior intelligence and the snake around his waist represents cosmic energy. The noose is to remind us that worldly attachments are a noose and the hook in his hand is to prod man on to the path of righteousness. The rosary beads are for the pursuit of prayer and the broken tusk is symbolic of knowledge as it is with this tusk that he is believed to have acted as the scribe who wrote down the Mahabharata as dictated by sage Vyasa. The 'modaka' or sweet in his hand is to remind us of the sweetness of one's inner self.

The physical form of Ganesha is corpulent and ~~awk~~ awkward to teach us that beauty of the outward form has no connection with inner beauty or spiritual perfection. Ganesha, on his vehicle, the mouse, symbolises the equal importance of the biggest and the smallest of creatures to the Great God.

'Kartikeya'

The other son of Shiva, Kartikeya, is also known as Kumara, Skanda, Subramanya, Shanmukha or Murugan (the last name used in Tamilnadu). As Kartikeya he is designated the deity of war, guarding right and destroying evil. As Shanmukha, the six-headed, he teaches that we have five senses and the mind, and only when all six are in harmony is there spiritual growth. As Subramanya, he has two consorts, Valli and Devasena, who embody Jnana Shakti, the power of knowledge and Kriya Shakti, the power of action. He rides the peacock, reminding us not to let pride and egotism get the better of us. In his hand he holds the 'vel' or sharp spear, symbolising the developed sharp intellect, and with it he guards the spiritual progress of the world.

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Vaishno Deve

Cosmic Energy in its dynamic form is symbolised for us ordinary mortals in the form of Shakti, the world Mother, who is the power and energy by which the Great God creates, preserves and destroys the world. She is shown in many forms. As Uma or Parvati, she is the gentle Consort of Shiva. As Kamakshi or Rajarajeshwari, she is the great Mother. In one hand she holds a noose, signifying worldly attachments from which we should free ourselves. The hook in her other hand is indicative of her prodding us on to the path of righteousness. The sugarcane plant she carries is a symbol of the sweetness of the mind. The arrows she holds in one hand are our five sense-perceptions which we have to conquer. In the form of Durga she rides the tiger, the ego and arrogance that man has to subdue. With the weapons in her hand she fights the eight evils (hate, greed, passion, vanity, contempt of others, envy, jealousy and the illusions with which man binds himself). In her angry form she is known as Kali, the personification of Time. In this frightening form she destroys Mahishasura (the demon buffalo) who is the symbol of ignorance which is man's greatest enemy. Her arms and weapons are constantly playing and fighting evil in all forms. The skulls she wears tell you that Man is mortal. Her dark form is symbolic of the future which is beyond our knowledge, and as Kali she tells you that Time (Kala) is immutable and all-powerful in the Universe.

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Shiva

Shiva, The destroyer of the universe, is shown as Nataraja, the King of dancers, his dance depicting Cosmic Energy. He dances on the demon, Apasmara Purusha, who represents our egos. Only by destroying one's ego can one attain God hood. In one hand Shiva holds a deer which denotes man's unsteady mind which darts hither and thither like the deer but has to be brought under control. In another he holds a rattle-drum, the symbol of creative activity, and in the third, the fire, the symbol of destruction. His fourth hand in the 'abhaya mudra' says 'Do not fear. I shall protect as I destroy.' The circle of fire behind him symbolises the continuity and eternal motion of the universe through the paths of Creation, Preservation and Destruction. The river goddess Ganga, on Shiva's head, denotes eternity and purity, and the crescent moon reminds us of the waxing and waning of the ~~Moon~~ Moon and the movement of the time. The Cobra coiling around him is, again, the symbol of Cosmic Energy. Shiva's garland of skulls reminds man that death comes to all and his third eye depicts that God is all seeing and wise. Placed in the centre of the forehead on which the yogi concentrates while in meditation, this spot is symbolic as the seat of wisdom. Shiva opens his third eye to destroy evil.

On the right ear Shiva wears a kundala (a jewel worn by men) and on his left ear 'tatanka' (ear ornament worn by women). This is to tell us that he is Ardhanarishwara, half-man and half-woman (as Parvati, his consort, is part of Shiva himself), symbolising the ideal union of man and woman. As fire and heat are inseparable, so are Shiva and Parvati one, and 'purusha' (the spirit) and prakriti (matter) are combined in them.

The ashes worn by Shiva tell us that the body is transient and ends in ashes. The tiger skin that he wears around his waist is the 'Ahankara' or arrogant pride which, like the tiger, springs out of us and has to be suppressed. Shiva not only destroys the universe but is also the destroyer of man's illusions and the cycle of birth and death which binds us to this world.

Soon after the creation of this world, Shiva is believed to have appeared in the form of a pillar of fire, reaching into space at one end and into the bowels of the earth at the other, and neither Brahma nor Vishnu was able to trace the beginning or end of this supernatural manifestation. Therefore Shiva is symbolised as a Linga or Lingam (meaning a symbol) representing this endless pillar of Cosmic power and light.

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He is also worshipped as Lingodbhavamurti, in which the figure of Shiva emerges out of the pillar of fire, with Brahma and Shiva standing on either side.

In all Shiva temples, his vehicle, Nandi the bull, faces the figure of Shiva symbolising the soul of man, the Jiva, yearning for Paramatma, the great Soul (God).

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Saraswati

The feminine aspect of the creator is personified in the beautiful form of Saraswati, the consort of Brahma, who is the embodiment of learning and wisdom. In her hand she holds the 'Vina', symbolic of 'R'ta', the order in the Cosmic Universe and of Nada-Brahman, the music or rhythm of the Universe. It is out of the sound of Om that the Universe was created. The hum or Nada, or the Inner Sound, the Music of the Cosmos, is also called the music of the spheres.

The beads in her fingers bring out the importance of prayer and meditation, and the palm leaf scrolls she holds represent learning and wisdom without which man is nothing. Her Saree, always white, reminds us that all knowledge of value should be pristine pure and unsullied by untruth. She sits either on the pure lotus or on the peacock, in the latter case to remind us that the ego (symbolised by the peacock) is to be suppressed. The graceful swan is also her vehicle, to remind us to separate the chaff from the grain of true knowledge, just as the swan removes the water from milk before consuming the latter.

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